



*Wonderful*  
**West Virginia**

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INSIDE FRONT COVER—Early spring of 1985 at Red Creek, Tucker County, before the devastating flood hit this area last fall. Gerald Ratliff

BACK COVER—One of the many varieties of violets which bloom some years as early as March. Gerald Ratliff

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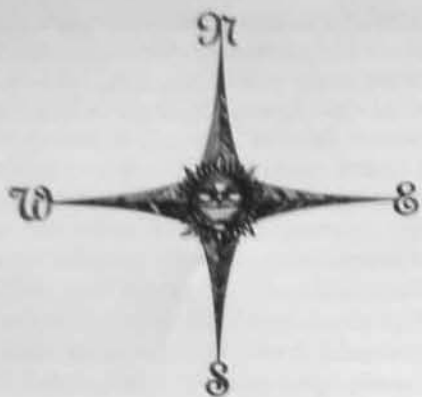
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# The Eastern Mountain Man

By GLEN BARNES

Less than the length of three lifetimes ago, Lewis Wetzel, Jesse Hughes, Simon Kenton, Daniel Boone, and a few other white adventurers hunted, soldiered, scouted, and provided encouragement to the scattered settlements and isolated cabins in this rich but dangerous land which we know today as West Virginia. At that time, our state was the traditional hunting grounds of Indian tribes that lived in the rolling hills and broad valleys that lay beyond the Ohio River. This was the border, the frontier. This was the realm of the eastern mountain man.

The mountain man of the East wore cloth when he could get it and leather when he couldn't. He wore a red rifleman's frock of blanket material and white linen pants, but nobody thought he was a greenhorn. Those coarse linens were the same style trousers his granddaddy wore as a soldier in General Washington's army only a few years earlier. This frontiersman might even pin his felt hat in that familiar three-cornered style or stick a turkey feather in a red knit liberty cap like the Patriots wore.

The Appalachian mountain man was proud of his French, Irish, Scottish, or German blood, and his nationality and personality showed in those bright-colored calicos, Balmoral bonnets, and striped knit voyageur sashes

that he wore with pride.

The ranger of the Appalachians may have acted like the mountain man of the West, but he looked and probably smelled different.

To trace the heritage of the eastern mountain man, let's go back in time to Colonial Virginia. The English who arrived at Jamestown in 1607, driven by a desire for freedom to live on a land of their own, must have soon wondered what lay in the vast wilderness to the west. The same urge that prodded them to venture across uncharted oceans soon led them to the base of the towering Appalachian Mountains. Those who made their way to the peaks of the mighty Blue Ridge looked beyond to behold a sight which, according to recorded history, had never been seen before by white men's eyes. Rank after rank of mountains disappeared into the distance, each mountain crest hiding a secret valley.

These massive natural fortifications guarded an untold wealth, a land uninhabited except for creatures of the forests and Indian hunters, a land waiting to be claimed for homes and farms with forests full of game for fur and meat. Herds of elk and deer and buffalo roamed the valleys, and the countryside teemed with an abundance of smaller game.

By the late 1600s some of the Virginians had pushed

farther to see the waters of the New River and the Great Falls of the Kanawha, and the French explorer LaSalle had journeyed down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers where the Allegheny foothills rose steeply from the eastern shore, now the westernmost boundary of the Mountain State.

Once the tales of this new land were told, there was no holding back the steady stream of settlers. Coming into the present-day northeastern counties of Berkeley, Hampshire, and Hardy, then down the South Branch of the Potomac River and inland to the Tygart, Greenbrier, and Monongahela river valleys, they chose sites and built clusters of cabins. Their lives remained peaceful until about 1754, when they were caught in the conflict between the British and the French and Indian allies (French and Indian Wars) over ownership of the land west of the Alleghenies. Many settlers died and many others were driven from their homes during those turbulent years.

In 1769 the first outposts began to appear along the upper Ohio River, and soon watercraft of every description carried newcomers to their homes along the length of the Ohio Valley.

About 1770, only a few years after the French and Indian Wars ceased, British troops still standing were turned against the settlers to prevent their claiming new lands. This opened another chapter of death and destruction that eventually united the colonists to fight and win their war of independence.

Throughout those troubled years that the settlers and the Indians vied with each other on the frontier, seeds of vengeance were sewn that would bear bitter fruit for years to come. From the mid-1700s through the early 1800s, a succession of men came forth to serve the settlers in the conflicts that arose as they struggled to maintain their foothold in the new land, and the Indians fought to preserve their traditional hunting grounds. These white woodland warriors were the strongest of a sturdy stock. As they grew in experience, they became more cunning and more skillful in the ways of the wilderness than the Indian. The white men could sustain themselves for months without contact with civilization and spent much of the year trapping beavers, foxes, and raccoons in the hidden valleys of the vast mountain ranges.

On their travels down the Ohio from the more populated fur trading centers such as Fort Pitt to the remote log forts in the wilderness, the Appalachian rangers carried news of the colonial government's military operations and heard reports of Indian attacks. On several occasions one of these wanderers arrived as a battle was raging and provided flanking fire. The welcome sound of his booming flintlock rallied the settlers to turn back the marauding Indians. Pioneer families grew to depend on the heroic, legendary figures of Lewis Wetzel, Levi and David Morgan, Simon Kenton, Daniel Boone, and other lesser known but equally courageous men of the eastern mountains.

The Appalachian frontiersman, climbing mile after

rocky mile, foot by moccasined foot, was not one to be burdened by unnecessary trappings. He welcomed, however, the heft of his heavy rifle. That long rifle was his constant companion—never more than arm's length away. The giant .50 caliber firearm, five and a half feet long with a four-foot barrel, could easily weigh more than ten pounds. Much of the gear hanging from leather shoulder straps and thongs consisted of muzzleloader supplies. A large horn filled with coarse black powder was suspended over a leather pouch containing lead shot, cloth ticking for rifle patches, spare flints, powder measure, lead, and a bullet mold. A smaller horn of priming powder hung from a separate strap and in a small sheath was a razor-sharp, short-bladed patch knife. To complete his arsenal, a wide belt carrying a long-bladed skinning knife at the side and supporting a tomahawk in the back was worn at his waist. A belt pouch held flint, striking steel, and a tinder to start a fire for warmth and cooking. Equipped in this fashion, the mountain man could slip into the forest to be seen again only after months had passed and hundreds of miles had been traveled.

In the early 1800s, generations later and half a continent away from the Appalachian borderlands, the trappers of the Rocky Mountains in the West began their profitable businesses in the fur trade era. Their adventures have been romanticized and immortalized by writers and western artists. Even today, the term *mountain man* usually brings to mind the image of the Rocky Mountain trapper. Many accounts have been written of his hardships as he endured the bitter western winters to bring out pack horse loads of beaver pelts destined to become fashionable fur hats for the city dwellers of the East. Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, John "Liver-Eating" Johnston, and their contemporaries lived in the western high country, seldom seeing another human unless they crossed the path of a band of Indians on a winter hunt or ventured cautiously into one of the red men's encampments in hope of trading for some new buckskins to replace their tattered clothing or a buffalo robe for the cold mountain nights.

After months of isolation from others of his kind and dependence on the Indians' tolerance of his business in their homelands, the Rocky Mountain trapper began to think and even look like an Indian. His buckskins were decorated with long fringes and hairlocks and bore the beaded ornamentation familiar to the western Indian. He was most likely clean-shaven to smooth relations with the western Indians who insultingly called bearded white men "Dogfaces."

Many of those who traveled to the Rockies took along their trusted long rifles—flintlocks made in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, or later ones made in Kentucky, Western Virginia, Ohio, and Tennessee. In the closing years of the fur trade era, some chose to carry the shorter .45 to .54 caliber caplock rifles newly developed by Jacob and Samuel Hawken of St. Louis.

The eastern mountain man was fighting Indians when Liver-eating Johnston was still wearing a dress. His pack horse was his back, and his business was nobody's business but his own. He wore a beard for lack of a razor and lack of concern for what the Indian thought of it. The red men were thinking more about the hair of his head—they thought it would make a fine addition to their scalp collections.

The Appalachian ranger was known for his hunting and tracking skills and stories of his prowess with a rifle spread quickly across the frontier. No doubt some of the tales were embellished by the appreciative homesteaders, but accounts of "the running reload" are reported by more than one history writer, and the skill is attributed to more than one frontiersman. The following event is recounted in *Myers' History of West Virginia*:

... Lewis Wetzel went with a friend to Indian Springs about nine miles east of Wheeling to retrieve a horse left during an earlier Indian attack. Upon finding his horse tied to a tree the friend approached the animal and was immediately killed by a hail of rifle fire from the nearby woods. Wetzel leapt through the attacking Indians and ran at top speed into the woods with four of the warriors in hot pursuit. After a chase of a half mile Wetzel spun around and shot the closest pursuer. Resuming his flight at full gallop he reloaded his rifle.

"RELOADED HIS RIFLE!" These three words don't begin to describe the gymnastics that Wetzel must have gone through to accomplish his life-saving deed. While jumping fallen logs and being whipped by briars and branches, Wetzel grasped the muzzle of his rifle, trailing it behind on its butt plate. Without bothering to measure, he pulled the plug of his powder horn with his teeth and dumped a charge down the rifle barrel. Holding the end of a strip of cloth ticking in his mouth, he groped in his hunting pouch for a lead ball. Placing one end of the still-moist cloth strip over the muzzle and the lead ball on the cloth, he pressed both into the muzzle opening, withdrew his patch knife and cut free the excess ticking. Replacing his knife into its sheath, he pulled the ramrod from its guides beneath the barrel. Reversing the rod, he drove ball and patch the length of the barrel until it seated against the powder charge; he quickly withdrew the ramrod and returned it to its guides. Then the rifle was lifted forward, the hammer placed in half-cocked position, and the frizzen snapped open to uncover the priming pan. From his small horn, he poured priming powder into the pan and closed the frizzen. With his thumb, he cocked the hammer and brought the rifle to his shoulder as he turned and fired the second time, eliminating another participant in the deadly race.

Wetzel performed his running reload again and shot one of the two remaining pursuers. The one survivor of the original group, thoroughly convinced of Wetzel's invincibility, retreated to tell the story of "the man whose

gun was always loaded."

Wetzel, Kenton and other famous Indian fighters gave much credit to the rifle crafted by expert Dutch and German gunsmiths in the Lancaster County area of Pennsylvania. Amid a haze of blue-gray smoke spewed from the muzzle of this fine flintlock, the skirmishes of the East were won.

The adventurous spirit of the eastern mountain men lives on in present-day West Virginia. It survives in the proud descendants of the original settlers and frontiersmen. It is felt by hunters, fishermen, and others who roam the state's rugged hills and hollows. The spirit of adventure and pride in the history of our region is especially evident in the members of the West Virginia Muzzle Loader Association clubs scattered throughout the state. Calling themselves buckskinners, they will, at the slightest provocation, shed their everyday identity as your neighbor or co-worker and don the garb and manner of the mountaineer, gathering with their fellow club members in a primitive encampment.

At one of these get-togethers, a West Virginia mountain meadow takes on the look of a long time past. Off-white tents glow in the setting sun against a backdrop of dark green forest. A faint smell of burnt black powder hangs in the air, and the occasional sound of a booming flintlock comes from down the valley where some "skinners" are sharpening their marksmanship. Tinware rattles nearby and family groups gather around their tents for the evening meal, drawn by delicious smells from the bubbling stew pot. Long calico dresses rustle as pioneer women bustle about the cooking fires and call to their children. From beyond the blacksmith's tent the sound of laughter echoes off the mountainside, as men in fringed buckskins and fur caps good naturedly rib one of their cronies whose tomahawk has buried itself in the dirt behind the target of an upturned stump. Small groups congregate to talk and joke and trade, and the lengthening shadow of a tall tipi falls across the face of a Shawnee brave as he haggles with the top-hatted trader over a Hudson's Bay Company blanket.

Rays from the setting sun light the interior of the French voyageur's lean-to and the handcrafted rifle which he proudly shows to a soldier in a Revolutionary War uniform. The soldier runs his fingers admiringly over the intricate brass inlays in the smooth maple stock, then removes his tricorne hat and sights down the long barrel.

The day's activities slow and stop. A quiet stillness settles over the camp, and crickets begin their song with the fading of daylight. Talk around the evening fires centers around old times and hunting and black powder rifles. As the dim glow of firelight falls on worn buckskins and bearded faces and reflects from burnished brown gunbarrels, pleasant aromas of wood smoke and boiling coffee fill the air, and the evening becomes an 18th century night. Lewis Wetzel, Simon Kenton, and Daniel Boone would feel right at home.